

INTRODUCTION

The *GirlSMART Literacy Program Guide* is the product of extensive dialogue about and analysis of the existing afterschool GirlSMART programs at sites in San Leandro and Oakland. The GirlSMART literacy program redesign was guided by extensive research on literacy. In 1997, congress asked the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to convene a panel of experts (known as the National Reading Panel) to conduct an exhaustive review of scientific-based research to assess the effectiveness of many approaches to teaching literacy. After reviewing more than 100,000 research articles, the National Reading Panel published their findings in 1997, *The Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read*. In this report, researchers identified five crucial building blocks of literacy: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension.

The evaluation of the GirlSMART Literacy Program that was conducted in summer of 2010 was guided by the results of National Reading Panel's report; significant attention was given to the types of activities that students were doing and how these activities supported the five crucial building blocks of literacy. Every GirlSMART staff member should read a summary of the National Reading Panel's report entitled: *Put Reading First* (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2003). The report states that kindergarten students should receive focused instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics and that as students move up the grades, they gradually receive less instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics and more instruction in the area of fluency and comprehension. (Phonemic awareness instruction should occur in pre school and kindergarten, while phonics instruction should occur in kindergarten and first grade.)The developmental needs of GirlSMART girls for each grade level were taken into consideration which is reflected in the time allocation for different literacy activities. The program redesign also includes a shift away from teacher-centered instruction to more time allocated to activities that require girls to actively engage in the learning process.

FIVE BUILDING BLOCKS

When GirlSMART staff assess and brainstorm ways to improve the current services they provide to their girls, they should take into consideration the extent to which their program supports students in building a strong foundation in the five building blocks of literacy. Below you will find a summary of the definitions of each building block found in *Put Reading First* (Armbruster et al., 2003).

PHONEMIC AWARENESS

Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, identify and manipulate sounds (phonemes) in spoken language. Students who have strong phonemic awareness can name words that rhyme and identify beginning, middle and ending sounds in words. Blending and segmenting words are two of the most common phonemic awareness activities used with pre-kinder, kindergarten and first grade students. In **phoneme blending**, students are asked to listen to a sequence of sounds spoken separately, such as /k/ /a/ /t/ and then blend them to make a word, “cat.” **Segmenting** is the opposite task; students are asked to listen to a word, and they are to pronounce each sound separately. For example, the teacher says, “dog,” and the student must say, “/d/ /o/ /g/.” They usually are asked to identify how many sounds (not letters) they hear. In the case of dog, the answer is three sounds. The ability to hear sounds is a very strong predictor for success in learning to read. Research shows that phonemic awareness improves children’s decoding skills, encoding skills, and reading comprehension (Armbruster et al., 2003).

PHONICS

Phonics instruction teaches children the alphabetic principle, or the concept that there is a predictable relationship between the sounds and the letters of English. Children must know the relationship between sounds in order to read and write. For example, children learn that the sound /k/ can be represented by the letter c. They then learn that it can be represented by the letter k, and much later, they learn that digraph “ch” as in *chronic*, can also represent the sound /k/.

The most effective phonics programs are systematic and explicit. Systematic means that instruction is planned in a logical sequence. GirlSMART staff should know the phonics program used by the school and follow their sequence for kindergartners. Explicit means that the teacher gives specific instructions in the letter and the sound it makes including activities with words that contain the letter and sound. It is important that students have ample opportunities to apply what they have learned by reading words, sentences, and stories. Phonic instruction is usually taught for no more than two years. In California, phonics instruction begins in kindergarten and usually ends in first grade. Students who are reading below grade level may need phonics instruction well past first grade.

FLUENCY

Fluency is the ability to read accurately and quickly. Fluent readers read words automatically and effortlessly. When they read aloud, they read with expression. Reading fluently is necessary to understand a text. Children who do not read fluently focus their cognitive energy on decoding and therefore cannot give enough attention to comprehending the text, which impedes their ability to understand what they read

Reading fluency develops over time with a lot of practice. Reading fluency is developed by modeling fluent reading to students and by having students engage in repeated oral readings. Activities that improve fluency include Reader's Theater, Guided Reading, one on one reading, choral reading, and partner reading. One of the changes in the curriculum redesign is the incorporation of Reader's Theater and partner reading. Read alouds expose students to how fluent readers read, and incorporating choral reading into read alouds is also encouraged.

VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

Vocabulary knowledge is important; it is the greatest predictor of reading comprehension and it plays a very important role for kids as they are learning to read. Beginning readers have a difficult time reading words that are not already part of their oral vocabulary, therefore students with large vocabularies will have an easier time decoding words. Once children know how to read, they will not be able to understand what they read if they do not know most of the words on the page. Most English learners are at a disadvantage when learning to decode and to read for understanding since often they do not know as many words in English as their native English speaking peers.

There are two ways that children learn vocabulary: indirectly, through oral and written language, and through direct vocabulary instruction. Research shows that students learn much of their vocabulary indirectly: 1) through conversations with people, especially adults, 2) by listening to adults read, 3) and by reading extensively on their own. Direct vocabulary instruction is effective and often necessary to help students learn difficult or complex words. Direct instruction is most effective when the teacher explicitly teaches a word before reading a text, when the teacher includes extension activities that require them to actively use the words and different contexts, and when students see, hear and work with words in different contexts.

TEXT COMPREHENSION

Reading comprehension is the reason we read. Students who can decode the words on a page but do not understand the text are merely decoding, not reading. Since comprehension is the main purpose for reading, teaching comprehension should be the focus during much of literacy time. Research shows that teaching text comprehension strategies is an effective way to improve reading comprehension. The following strategies have been identified as effective:

- ☞ Monitoring comprehension
- ☞ Using graphic and semantic organizers
- ☞ Answering questions

-
- Generating questions
 - Recognizing text structure
 - Summarizing

Please note that GirlSMART programs will use comprehension strategies found in *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding* (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). Chapter Four in this literacy program guide discusses these strategies in depth.

Monitoring comprehension teaches students to pay attention to when they do not understand what they are reading and how to use strategies to repair their understanding. Teachers should teach students to identify where the comprehension difficulty occurs, what the difficulty is, restate the difficult sentence or passage in their own words, look back through the text, and look forward in the text for information that might help them to resolve the difficulty.

Graphic organizers illustrate concepts and relationships among concepts in a text, using diagrams or other pictorial devices. Semantic organizers are a type of graphic organizer that show a variety of related concepts connected to a central concept. Graphic organizers can be used with any type of text and are effective because they provide students with a visual tool they can use to better understand concepts and relationships.

Answering questions facilitates text comprehension and retention of information that is read. Readers who must answer questions have a focused purpose for reading, think actively as they read, and must review the content they read and relate it to what they already know.

When teachers brainstorm questions they want to ask student about a specific text, it is important to keep in mind that not all questions are equally difficult. The simplest question which requires the least amount of understanding is the text explicit question. A text explicit question is stated in the text in one sentence. For example, if a book contains the following sentence: John was born on September 7, 2009, and the teacher asks students when John was born, then she is asking a text explicit question. Questions that require students to make inferences or evaluate a character's actions (Do you think John did the right thing?) require a deeper level of comprehension on the students' part. A teacher should make sure that she asks the students these types of questions and not just text explicit questions.

Generating questions fosters active reading and thinking on the part of the reader. By generating their own questions, students can gauge whether they understand what they have read or not. A teacher must teach students how to ask questions by modeling and

thinking aloud her own questions, reminding students to not just ask the text explicit questions, and praising students who ask good questions.

Recognizing text structure can help students better understand what they are reading. In the case of a story, students learn that stories have a setting, characters, a plot and a theme. They also should know that the plot includes a problem that the main character has to solve, the rising action or steps the characters has to take to solve the problem, the resolution of the character's problem and the ending or denouement.

Summarizing can help students identify main ideas and remember what they have read. Students must be able to determine what is important in what they have read, condense this information and put in their own words.